

LANDS! (Let's Agree Not to Dispose of Schools!)
Rally at the Provincial Legislature – April 7, 2008 at 11:30 am

BACKGROUND

School lands are not ours to sell:

Many years ago visionary people set aside public school lands for the future good of families they would never meet – not just our generation, but all future generations. There are approximately 140 school properties at risk of being sold off across BC.

Basics:

1. The Ministry of Education has instructed the school districts to “bring money to the table” for short-term capital projects, forcing them to close schools and sell so-called “surplus” school lands.
2. Declining enrolment figures are only predicting decline until 2015 – just 7 years away;
3. We in the baby-boom population bulge will be dead, downsized or in care within 30 years, leaving room for new young families who will need community based schools – especially as we pass peak oil and live and work closer to home;
4. Community schools knit communities together, building healthy neighbourhoods and societies.
5. Often, schools slated to receive the children from closing schools are already full. The Ministry is forcing a generation of children to go to school in portables.
6. The speech from the throne promised investigation introducing day kindergarten and preschool programs in the public schools– these government promises will require every inch of classroom space in the Province.
7. Driving kids to distant schools increases greenhouse gases and global warming.
8. Once the school lands are gone we will not be able to reassemble this much public green space in the future;
9. Accessible universal public education is a cornerstone of our democracy, our communities and our economic security.

Band-aid solutions:

Recently, Education Minister Shirley Bond announced a new policy *asking*, not telling, school districts to offer to sell so-called “surplus” school lands to public organizations before selling to the private sector. The instructions stipulate “fair market value” making them unaffordable for public organizations.

Minister Bond passed her stewardship responsibility to the Ministry of Labour and Citizens’ Services making the school lands more difficult to monitor. This Ministry has over 1,500 properties to oversee. Selling to other public organizations does nothing to protect green spaces.

A Chain of Abuse by Neglect:

The Province has downloaded increasing responsibilities onto school districts, regional authorities and municipalities without downloading resources and capacity. Like children turned loose in the neighbourhood and then punished when they don’t bring home food, the boards can’t defend themselves. They are afraid of being fired, so they keep silent.

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Either the boards bully the community, which is the behaviour they see the Province modelling; or they suffer attack from both above and below. We tear our own communities apart, blaming each other for our failures. We try to think of creative ways of preserving public access to land that is already ours – but really we are simply adapting to neglect and abuse.

Breaking the silence:

Until we break the silence this government will continue to give away, privatize or sell our greatest assets while insisting that they can't afford to fund public goods.

We must break the silence and tell the Ministry of Education we were never consulted, nor did we ever agree to cuts in capital or operating funding to universal public education. We never agreed to cut education spending by 16% since 2001 -- from 6.2% of GDP to 5.2% of GDP -- with a mere 1% enrolment drop.

United, communities, municipalities and districts will save schools

Fortunately, we do not need to capitulate to the dismal agenda of school fees, closures, elitism and further driving wedges between the haves and have-nots.

The *municipalities* can protect these lands through maintaining their institutional zoning. *Local communities* can resist divide and conquer tactics and support *School Boards who refuse to sell*.

Send a Message:

Let the Province know through letters, phone calls and visits to your MLA that:

1. We have no right to sell off these lands. They belong to future generations of children.
2. Green spaces on school lands must be preserved;
3. Priority must always be given to future use as *public* schools.
4. School lands must remain under the ownership and stewardship of their local school districts until such time as the provincial government acknowledges its stewardship responsibilities.
5. Universal public education is a foundation of our democracy, our civil society and our economy.

Everyone has a role to play:

We need *municipalities* to stand firm on zoning, we need *school boards* to be brave and speak out against these cuts, we need *citizens to unite* and *we need this Provincial government to acknowledge its constitutional responsibility to universal public education*.

We need universal public education if we are to retain Canada as a civil democracy where opportunity is not dependent on an accident of birth. Like those who originally set these lands aside, we can imagine abundance and justice and generosity and we can make choices with these values uppermost in our minds. Speak out so that these lands will forever be a legacy for the children of British Columbia.